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ABSTRACT

An examination is made into the possible reasons for underachievement in higher education, on the theory that personological variables such as persistence and diplomacy may contribute as much to success as I.Q. points. Various lists are provided of the salient factors, and their explanations, that contribute to underachievement, as proposed by several authors on the subject. Among these factors are: too little or too much self-conficence; procrastination; fear of failure; lack of concentration; poor judgment; and wallowing in personal difficulties or excessive self-pity. Nine common reasons for "failure" or lack of success are also listed and include: lack of commitment; poor interpersonal skills; self-destructive behavior; poor management; and not being properly focused. Along with these, additional self-defeating behaviors or cognitions are described, such as an inordinate use of alcohol and drugs, excessive escapism, burn-out, emotional disturbance, and a lack of coping skills. It is suggested that in studying underachievement, the role of personality and motivation should be emphasized more and that less reliance should be placed on I.Q. test scores and their relationship to achievement test scores or performance in the real world. (GLR)

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Underachievement in Higher Education -- Intelligence, Personality, and Motivation

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Running head: Underachievement in Higher Ed.

While it is all well and good to theorize about, research, and investigate the construct of "intelligence," we must not lose sight of the fact that it is often what we do with our intellectual skills that "make or break us." Further, as no man is an island, and we exist in a social world, we must be sensitive to the toes of our colleagues and associates as we scramble up the ladder to success. In essence, one's personality and motivation can make a major difference in one's success. Personological variables such as persistence and diplomacy may contribute as much to success (however you define that!) as I.Q. points.

The newer theorists have begun to recognize the importance of investigating not only why people do well, but also why many highly "intelligent" folk (at least as measured, by I.Q. points) do not do well. Call them "under-achievers" or label them as "lazy," they still remain a mystery. On the other hand, we all know of a "slow Joe," who did well for himself/herself over the long haul.

In addition, to Robert Sternberg's reconceptualization of intelligence, he has also explored the realm of under-achievement if you will. Perhaps in order, to maximally utilize our cognitive talents we should seriously assess his thinking in this matter.

Sternberg (1986) has indicated the following reasons why intelligent people do not do well.

1. Lack of motivation.

2. Lack of impulse control.
3. Lack of perseverance and perseveration.
4. Using the wrong abilities.
5. Inability to translate thought into action.
6. Lack of product orientation.
7. Inability to complete tasks and to follow through.
8. Failure to initiate.
9. Fear of failure.
10. Procrastination.
11. Misattribution of blame.
12. Excessive self pity.
13. Excessive dependency.
14. Wallowing in personal difficulties.
15. Distractibility and lack of concentration.
16. Spreading oneself too thin or too thick.
17. Inability to delay gratification.
18. Inability or unwillingness to see the forest for the trees.
19. Lack of balance between critical, analytic thinking and creative, synthetic thinking.
20. Too little or too much self-confidence.

In the realm of business and industry too, very intelligent people fail to "make it." It seems that performance in college and on I.Q. tests does not always insure success. Recently, a book by Hyatt and Gottlieb (1987) has listed nine common reasons

for "failure" or lack of success. Their book explains in depth, with salient examples, some of the problems a highly intelligent person may face. The following indicates the reasons, and includes this author's paraphrasing.

1. Poor interpersonal skills (this includes being sensitive to others; listening to hear the subtext of what is said; giving and taking criticism well, being emotionally steady and building team support).

2. "Wrong Fit" (this may include A) working in the "wrong environment" or having B) a wrong value system for your setting or situation or C) having the "wrong co-workers").

3. Lack of Commitment. For some people this may mean they have not as yet found an area of interest to commit themselves entirely. Others may be "stuck" for whatever reason in a "dead-end" position.

4. Bad Luck. Some people are born lucky, others are unlucky, still others make their own luck.

5. Self Destructive Behavior. While some people see complaining as trying to rectify intolerable conditions, others see this as "chronic complaining."

6. "Too Scattered to Focus. Some people have "cognitive slippage" and have difficulty focusing on one area of interest.

7. Sexism, Ageism, Racism. Stupid comments can be the downfall of certain people. Neglecting the assistance or services

of older, wiser, more insightful mentors or colleagues can be detrimental.

8. Poor Management - Over or Under Delegation. There is a time to type, and a time to pay a typist. Also, there are people you can trust and others who are incompetent. These subtle differentiations are important.

9. Hanging On. In academia, many students opt for a second B.A. or a second Master's degree. Or in the job market, some people have devoured an entire position, are 100% capable of "moving on" to bigger and better things, yet they "hang on" for whatever reason - possibly security.

The authors indicate, however, that "failure" need not be forever. It can be a positive step toward re-evaluation, and can assist in the re-assessment of skills, strengths and weaknesses Further, it can help people take a long, hard, honest look at themselves and their goals. Also, it can provide an impetus for further growth and development.

Albert Ellis (1987) famed founder of Rational-Emotive Therapy has also investigated some salient factors regarding intellectual, academic and even emotional difficulty. Some of these promote life failure, others perpetuate emotional disturbance, hence exacerbating life and interpersonal failure. The reasons are from Ellis (1987), the discussions from this writer's experiences.

1. Ignorance - Some people are ignorant of the important factors necessary to "get ahead." Others ignore factors such as networking, publishing, presenting, and cultivating one's skills. One graduate student mentored by this author simply was ignorant of the importance of computer skills and the need to master higher order statistical abilities. He continued to do "t-test" research and failed to earn tenure. Another doctoral level student simply wanted to write literature reviews and ignored empirical research.

2. Stupidity - although doctoral and master's level people are obviously bright in their chosen field of endeavor, they often fail to use common sense in chasing their own long-range goals. One doctoral student known by this writer married shortly after beginning his Ph.D. program. Several years, and two children later, he was just beginning his proposal. Although his goal was the rapid procurement of the doctorate, his family responsibilities interfered with his goal.

3. Unperceptiveness - Some people are simply interpersonally unperceptive. Another doctoral candidate alienated the faculty by being overly friendly and by choosing esoteric topics for research. After one paper on Primal Therapy, one paper on E.S.P., and one paper on EST, he was a pariah in the department.

4. Rigidity - Some personality structures are extremely rigid and uncompromising. A very bright doctoral candidate

insisted on pursuing a naturalistic observation form of research. He could not be dissuaded from this position. Although he finally procured a teaching position, it did take him several years of searching and applying.

5. Defensiveness - People must be open to criticism be it constructive or other. People who are constantly on the defensive alienate others attempting to aid them. Their defensiveness acts as a barrier to a productive relationship and often a mentor simply "gives up on 'a defensive Dan."

6. Pollyannaism and Indifference. Some students and workers too, sabotage their own long-term goals by either inordinately worrying about some detail, or by neglecting some major problem. One friend, Paul, never published as he was overly preoccupied with making an error or mistake. Another student, Pauline, ignored my concerns about using parametric statistical procedures on non-parametric data. Needless to say, the dissertation was a shambles.

7. Changing the situation rather than changing oneself. Ralph had his committee all picked out and was ready to work. Unfortunately one member went on sabbatical, another retired early. Rather than choosing two new faculty members, Ralph chose to wait for the return of one faculty member and urged the other out of retirement. Needless to say, time was lost and a veritable

glut of jobs passed Ralph by. Ralph is now faced with the death of one of his committee members.

Other Self-Defeating Behaviors and Cognitions

In addition, to the factors explored above, there are probably many other self-defeating behaviors and cognitions which thwart highly intelligent people. These include:

1. Inordinate use of alcohol and drugs. Although one would expect college educated people to avoid drugs they continue to use ups, downs and middles They invariably find something to get addicted to.

2. Excessive Escapism, i.e., T.V. watching, movies, video games, overeating, over indulgence in sex, sports, and other diversionary activities, interferes with the full development of one's intellectual potential.

3. Over-preoccupation with low level, simple details and tasks while ignoring higher order, more difficult chores and assignments.

4. Burn-Out. The person who devotes so much time initially to their chosen field of endeavor that they have little emotional energy left for later efforts. This occurs among a great many doctoral students who spend inordinate amounts of time and energy on their course work, then are depleted emotionally when dissertation time arrives. Likewise, many new Ph.D.'s never do

another piece of empirical research after their doctoral dissertation. They are emotionally drained and psychologically depleted. Motivational exhaustion and fatigue severely interfere with the maximal use of one's intellectual reservoir.

5. Lack of coping skills. While many successful people have excellent academic or business skills, they are sorely lacking in people skills, and the ability to juggle multiple tasks, roles and problems. Rather than take a Dale Carnegie refresher or seminar, they remain fixated in their old ways and continue to plod along unsuccessfully. These coping skills can include time, money, and people management skills as well as travel skills, organizational skills and crisis intervention skills.

6. Emotional Disturbance. A great many very intelligent people fail to succeed simply because of neurosis or emotional problems or disturbances. Anxiety, compulsions, obsessive thoughts/problems and the like all interfere with maximal functioning.

7. Self-Destructive or Self-Defeating Behavior. Often people are their own worst enemies sabotaging their own professed goals. There may, in fact, be a fear of success in some cases (both male and female). One doctoral student did suffer a heart attack as he neared his dissertation. His medical condition then served as his "excuse" as to why he could not resume writing and

research. After a time, his time limitation, and extension ran out. He became like many others, an A.B.D. (All But Dissertation).

8. Fear. Many students have math phobia, fear of statistics or "sadistics," public speaking and fear of rejection. These fear interfere with optimal functioning and must be addressed.

9. Organizational skills (or lack thereof) can be a major factor contributing to one's success. A highly organized person tends to be efficient, through and competent. Their organizational abilities impress others and save them time in the long run.

Obviously, the list of factors, variables and personality traits that interfere with optimal intellectual performance could go on and on. When researching human intelligence, we obviously must not lose touch with the human dimension and the person's motivation to do well and succeed. Mentoring, networking and grooming may be options for addressing some of the foibles addressed above. How much of one's success in life is due to intelligence, or personality or motivation is clearly a question on the magnitude of the nature/nurture dilemma. But perhaps one that should be addressed, if only tangentially, by theoreticians and researchers in the realm of human intelligence.

In the past, we have labeled people as "under-achievers" and "overachievers" based on I.Q. test scores and their relationship to achievement test scores or performance in the real world. Perhaps much of success in the real world is transitory on reductive. Perhaps we should be taking a much closer look at motivation, drive and desire to succeed, instead of conducting elaborate factor analytic studies. In addition, we should also be re-examining the role of personality and personological variables in achievement and success. Perhaps the well rounded, well adjusted well trained individual is of more use to society than a narrow, neurotic person. In an increasingly complex stressful technological society it will be interesting to see who the fittest are that will survive.

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